

Employment of People with Disabilities

Federal Efforts to Increase Job Placements



BY KATHLEEN MARTINEZ

There are 54 million people with disabilities, and their talents enrich our communities every single day. Opening the door to opportunity for these workers is not just a goal, but a responsibility for us as a nation. My work at the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) is founded on the principle that a critical component of achieving better employment outcomes for people with disabilities is through promoting positive expectations of employability among people with disabilities and their families, as well as employers, hiring managers and supervisors.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ART AS A CATALYST

PHOTO COURTESY OF CSAAC



Employment First

Employment First is a philosophy based on the premise that people with disabilities *can* work—and that they can work alongside people without disabilities in community jobs with real wages. The philosophy recognizes that employment is critically important for citizens to accomplish their life goals, pay their bills and secure their future. Following Employment First principles, any plan that intends to promote a financially secure and good quality of life for an individual with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) must include employment as part of that plan. We know that individuals with ASD can work. That is the bottom line. But in order to make work a reality, the systems of service and support available to assist people into employment must be organized to ensure that individuals with ASD have what they need to be successful.

In 2009, the Centers for Disease Control issued a report indicating that the prevalence of autism had risen to 1 in every 110 births in the United States and almost 1 in 70 boys. It is clear that as the rate of autism increases and more people with ASD are of adult age, our nation must recognize that individuals with ASD are able to work and that they want to be accepted into the American workforce.

Allan I. Bergman, in a 2010 policy paper entitled “Expanding

Employment and Career Options for Individuals on the Autism Spectrum in 21st Century Digital Media and Communications Technology,” highlights that many individuals with ASD have personal qualities that employers particularly appreciate (Bergman, 2010). According to him, individuals with ASD often think “outside the box,” which can lead to creative and innovative problem solving. Many individuals with ASD have excellent rote and/or long-term memories. Most pay attention to detail and are task-oriented. Many work well with routines and repetitive tasks. And a majority have high personal and professional standards.

Of course, just like everyone else, people with ASD have their own individual personalities and abilities. As individuals with disabilities, they must believe that employment is an achievable goal for them and that potential employers will both welcome them and nurture their talent, so that they can achieve career success.

Bergman also indicates that the best employers for individuals with ASD are:

- Flexible and open to new ways of completing a task;
- Supportive of their employees;
- Organized and able to explain exactly what the job requires; and
- Directly interested in helping their employees succeed.

At ODEP, we embrace and encourage Employment First philosophies and help make them a reality. We were established in 2000 as an office within the Department of Labor to bring a committed focus to disability employment policy and to advance the employment of people with disabilities. To achieve this goal, ODEP has cast a wide net—working with partners in the private and public sectors, including federal and state governments—to create and highlight new policies and proven strategies that improve employment outcomes.

Implementing Sound Employment Policies

Each person who finds a job strengthens the U.S. economy and our nation's financial future. Implementing sound and innovative policies that improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities is especially important because this population continues to be markedly underrepresented in the U.S. workforce. The most recent report, issued in March 2011 by the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), shows that only 21 percent of working-age people (16-64) with disabilities are actually in the American labor force. In comparison, for people reporting no disabilities, the participation rate is 69.7 percent.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CSAAC



Closing this gap would likely yield savings for the government, as it would mean that millions of Americans who are currently disconnected from the economy would begin earning income, paying taxes and reducing their dependence on public resources.

On the 20th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act in July 2010, President Barack Obama signed Executive Order 13548, entitled "Increasing the Federal Employment of Individuals with Disabilities." This Executive Order requires federal agencies to develop and implement action plans for increasing the number of individuals with disabilities in their workforce. These plans must include performance targets and numerical goals, with sub-goals for the employment of individuals with targeted disabilities. It also requires that federal agencies build accountability into these efforts that includes regular reports of their progress to the President, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the public.

Specific ODEP Initiatives

ODEP was one of several agencies to provide input into the development of this Executive Order, but we fully understand that it is the actions taken in response to it that matter most.

We will be working with OPM to share our knowledge of best practices, and model recruitment and hiring strategies with all federal agencies. We will also assist OPM in developing training programs that can be disseminated to human resources personnel and hiring managers across the federal government. And we are developing a government-wide “community of practice” to encourage further development and sharing of best practices.

A related initiative of the Department of Labor is the work of the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) to revise the regulations under Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act, which outlines the nondiscrimination and affirmative action requirements for people with disabilities in the federal contractor sector. This is a huge opportunity because federal contractors employ about 22 percent of the nation’s workforce. An Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking was issued on this regulation in July 2010. ODEP continues to work closely with OFCCP on this effort.

ODEP has many other employment initiatives. For example, we are undertaking a partnership between ODEP and DOL’s Employment and Training Administration (ETA) called the Disability Employment Initiative (DEI), with the goal of expanding the capacity of the One-Stop Career Center system to serve customers with disabilities and to produce higher quality outcomes for those customers. In September 2010, DOL awarded over \$21 million to nine states through DEI, including Alaska, Arkansas, Delaware, Illinois, Kansas, Maine,

New Jersey, New York and Virginia.

We also have a new initiative, called Add Us In, which is designed to identify and develop strategies to increase employment opportunities within the small business community for individuals with disabilities. Included within the small business community are targeted businesses that are owned and operated by minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals; women; and people with disabilities. Add Us In is led by four consortia out of the University of Missouri-Kansas City; the Community Partners-Integrated Recovery Network in Los Angeles, Calif.; the Workplace, Inc., in Bridgeport, Conn.; and the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Okla.

ODEP also has a number of initiatives focused on youth employment, including our co-sponsorship of the Workforce Recruitment Program (WRP) with the Department of Defense. WRP is a recruitment and referral program that connects federal managers and supervisors with postsecondary students and recent graduates with disabilities who are eager to prove their abilities in the workplace through summer or permanent jobs.

Throughout our efforts, ODEP recognizes and embraces a number of employment service models, including traditional Vocational Rehabilitation, Supported Employment, Customized Employment, Traditional Employment, Self-Employment and various forms of self-direction that provide control and choice to the individual job seeker.

Promoting the availability of workplace accommodations



PHOTO COURTESY OF CSAAC

and assistive technology is another key employment strategy. Often, a person with a disability can be made much more employable because of technology that offsets some of the effects of their disability. We need to make it easier for workers with disabilities to get the necessary accommodations to perform their jobs. Most accommodations are not cost-prohibitive, especially when taking into account the increased productivity that results from their utilization. In fact, data suggest that more than half of all accommodations cost nothing, and most employers actually report financial benefits from providing accommodations, as the costs of training new employees go down and worker productivity goes up.

ODEP is committed to providing technical assistance and practical solutions for both employees and employers through the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), which was established in 1983. JAN is the country's leading source of free, expert guidance on workplace accommodations and can be reached at: www.askjan.org or by phone at 1(800) 526-7234 (voice) and 1(877) 781-9403 (TTY).

Challenges for the Future

While I am proud of the work ODEP is doing today, I am also focused on addressing the issues that we know are going to be important to the workforce in the future. We must recognize that the American workforce, like our population as a whole, is changing. Workers are aging on the job, and we know that people are more likely to experience an onset of disability after the age of 50. This includes people who may have been born with disabilities and who are now facing the onset of additional disabilities. This workforce trend has many implications, including:

- It will become increasingly difficult to fill entry-level job vacancies, as the pool of younger workers diminishes.
- It will become increasingly important to utilize every worker in order to fill jobs vacated by retirees.
- As individuals age, they may also develop secondary disabling conditions. The employment and rehabilitation professional communities must be prepared to accommodate these situations, so older workers who wish to remain employed can do so.
- Employers will be increasingly compelled to take better advantage of emerging, assistive technologies and workplace flexibility models as a way to attract job seekers in an increasingly diverse workforce. Research shows that strategies like telework and flextime contribute greatly to a more inclusive workplace, and can dramatically enhance the employability of people with disabilities. For example, telework can be utilized to provide a quieter home workplace

environment to a worker who needs it. While workplace flexibility strategies are often thought to include flexibility around where you work (telework) and when you work (hours and/or days), they can also include flexibility around job tasks. This opens the door to creative employment positions for people with complex life situations that impact their employment.

ODEP has conducted some research on telework and flextime options, and we will continue to disseminate this information to the American public, along with the newer approach of flexibility around job tasks. More information on all of ODEP's research and initiatives can be found at <http://www.dol.gov/odep/>.

Improving employment outcomes for job seekers with ASD is an important goal for our nation. As advocates, we can be the catalysts for raising the labor participation rate of all people with disabilities. ODEP is proud to play a role in this effort and is pleased with the commitment this Administration has shown to this goal. Working with our constituents, we will make our nation stronger by improving opportunities for all Americans with disabilities to obtain employment and advance their economic status. A more diverse and inclusive workforce will not only improve the lives of individuals, but also strengthen our economy and result in a government better able to respond to the needs of all of its people.

Reference

Bergman, A.I. (2010). Expanding employment and career options for individuals on the autism spectrum in 21st century digital media and communications technology. Available at: <http://www.mnddc.org/asd-employment/pdf/BergmanDI4.pdf>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathleen Martinez was nominated by President Barack Obama to be the third Assistant Secretary for Disability Employment Policy, and was confirmed by the U.S. Senate on June 25, 2009. As head of the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), Ms. Martinez advises the Secretary of Labor and works with all DOL agencies to lead a comprehensive and coordinated national policy regarding the employment of people with disabilities.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ODEP